

ART. XVIII.—*Address at the Inauguration of the Literature and Art Section of the Royal Society.*

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In his recently published "Letters on Literature," Mr. Andrew Lang, with a touch of that fine superciliousness, that fashionable air which your critic affects now, observes:—"Can anything speak more clearly of the decadence of the art of poetry than the birth of so many poetical 'societies?' . . . They all demonstrate that people have not the courage to study verse in solitude, and for their proper pleasure; men and women need confederates in this adventure." "Demonstrate," do they? Because, forsooth, it is inconceivable that they may be the outcome of real earnest interest and devoted study, which bears fruit in desire for communion with kindred minds, for the give and take of thought and criticism, that so the golden sands of the stream of song may yield up the more treasure. And does the birth of a microscopical society "demonstrate" that men will not investigate alone, or the birth of a musical society that they cannot sing and play in the privacy of home? Is it too flattering to human nature to imagine that people may wish to meet to interchange ideas upon what interests them deeply; that it is not mere hypocrisy which brings strangers together, to be thenceforth made friends by the strong bond of common intellectual pursuits and tastes? Is this feature of our time something strange and wholly new? Not so, but it is a genuine rational endeavour to supply that which our fathers enjoyed, but which altered social conditions have made unattainable, under the same form, in these days. The nights at the "Mermaid" are fled beyond recall; nor will men gather any more, as once they gathered, round "glorious John" enthroned at Will's; nor will such discourse of gods be again heard, as when the coffee houses knew Johnson and

Goldsmith and Burke. Yet we are not, therefore, behind our fathers in love of intellectual culture, and it is a pitiful cynicism which can see in literary societies only a sham enthusiasm, an attempt to galvanise into a semblance of life the taste and interest that have long been dead. Rather is it matter for surprise, that for years past there has been in Melbourne no society having for its object the study of literature and art. There have been Browning and Shelley societies; there is—to the astonishment and confusion of the critics who croaked at its birth—a Shakspeare Society, flourishing in vigour still; there are also divers associations of skilled votaries of music and art—these, however, are almost professional in their character; but for those who can pretend to no special gifts or training, there is no place and little interest in these. And meanwhile the world's inspired work goes on; its poets sing as seldom they have sung in times past; its romancers weave their wonder-webs; its musicians, now as in Shakspeare's day, "hale men's souls out of their bodies;" its painters kindle the light that never was on sea or land; and of all this each of us sees and hears and notes a little, in fragments, overlooking much, and missing the significance of more, forming half judgments, and receiving fast-fading impressions. In casual meeting with friends who are like-souled, he may compare thoughts, and find how much of the past and the present a solitary reader is in danger of missing, and may taste how good a thing it is to interchange ideas, and to tell and hear of pilgrimages into the fairyland of mind, and to discourse together of work that will endure, of names that will be enshrined, of ever-living presences that will be enthroned long after the sand-ripples of politics have been a myriad times washed out and re-moulded by the tides of time, and the babble of society gossip is become as the withered leaves that fluttered to the ground in forgotten autumns.

To substitute for such casual communication of thought some system of mutual help and guidance, to gather and focus the literary interest of a great city, to make something nobler than a coterie, something more unselfish than a clique, was the aim of those who proposed to quicken into life this literature and art section of the Royal Society of Victoria. There is something peculiarly British in the instinct for the old paths, which prompted them, not to burst upon the world with a new society of imposing title, but to awaken a

long dormant potentiality of the good old Royal Society. Few of the two score members who have attended—or of the ten score who have stayed away from—the meetings of this respectable body, have bethought them that beneath its ample wing there was room for any nestlings but such as chirped abstrusely of biology, chemistry, physics, and all that stern sisterhood of science, who are not to be wooed save with tireless toil of research, with concentration of knitted brows, and libations of midnight oil. At meeting after meeting we sat and listened while our betters threaded labyrinths of theory, and shot out waggon loads of facts, lightly gliding through mazy calculations, or glibly “chattering stony names.” We hearkened diligently with much heed, if haply we might gather for ourselves a few crumbs from so plenteous, and so indigestible, a feast. And still we gazed, and still the wonder grew, as other Anakim rose, and discussed and criticised off-hand these miracles of abstruseness, put what seemed to be pertinent questions, and with Burleigh-nods received answers which, for us, “made the case darker, which was dark enough without.” But not even the genial aspect of our president, as he sat wearing all that weight of learning lightly like a flower, could embolden us to rise and reveal our abysmal ignorance by question, much less by criticism. We were in our own sight as grasshoppers, and so we were in their sight. There was something depressing in being thus, as it were, mere cumberers of the ground, the one excuse for the impertinence of whose existence lay in the hope that our annual subscriptions helped to plume the wings of science for soaring far above our ken. Then some one spoke his open-sesame at a long-sealed door, and behold, we also had a mission!

And now that our vocation is revealed to us, we perceive that we can never be at a loss for lack of material whereon to work. For, passing by for the present music and art, as being as yet but doubtfully represented amongst us, the whole range of literature lies before us as our field of study. Homer is not too remote, nor Browning too near. Nor poetry only, but fiction, with—shall we say, including?—history and biography; the long result of time in scholarship and criticism; the thoughts that shake mankind in theology and philosophy. The mine is inexhaustible; how we shall work it, we see as yet but dimly. We may remark at the outset, that the main object of our co-operation must be to furnish incentives and aids to reading and reflection.

It may be accepted as an axiom, that no amount of criticism or discussion of a book, if it is worth reading, can serve as a substitute for reading it, and if it is not worth reading, it is not worth talking about. Unless, therefore, the papers that will be read at our meetings, and the discussions that will follow, stimulate us as individuals to extend our acquaintance with literature by personal study, the work of this section will be but a casting of seed by the wayside, for nothing is more evanescent than knowledge picked up from mere talk about a subject, nothing more fleeting than the interest so excited, if it be not followed up by earnest, fruitful research.

This outcome of our work must, of course, depend almost entirely upon members individually, but it is well that they should understand that one for whom our meetings constitute, not the salt, but the food of his literary life, is not only surrendering the substance for the shadow, but is thwarting the very object for which we co-operate. For it must be recognised, that the work of a literary society does not stand on the same footing as that of a scientific society. The latter is, to a considerable extent at least, concerned with original discovery ; and every minutest observation, every lifting of a corner of nature's veil, may prove one more fresh addition to the mass of details, the accumulation of which by a host of patient investigators is providing the heritage of posterity, the hope and prophecy of science, the solution of the riddle of the earth. And in no country can the work of the biologist, for example, be more important than in Australia now, while yet so many ancient and unique types remain which are doomed to disappear before the advancing tide of settlement. The searcher into nature may be said to be working against time ; every moment may be precious, as bringing an opportunity irretrievable if lost ; every find may be pure gold, as he rescues vanishing links and gathers up failing clues, for lack of which the men of future days would grope in darkness and twist ropes of sand. He heaps up riches, and if he knows not who shall gather them, at least he knows that they surely will be gathered, and that the harvest will be many times the richer for every grain saved now.

But we of this section of the society are not so much wealth-heapers, as wealth-users. We look to rescue no waifs from antiquity ; we shall not unearth treasures of archæology ; the voices that call out of the past will scarcely reach us first, nor will it be ours to place new leaves on Clio's brow. It

may well be that our tribute to the world of scholarship and criticism will be insignificant, nor do we flatter ourselves that the thinkers of far-off lands will ever learn to wait till we have spoken. But we need not, therefore, underrate the importance of our actual work. If self-culture only were the end and aim of our association, there would be ample justification for this section's existence ; for as no man liveth to himself, whatsoever be our gains in freshness and depth of thought, in wealth of widened culture, and clearness of intellectual vision, we win for others also. From the quickening of a man's mental powers, a magnetic influence thrills those with whom he mingles, nor does he, in rising, wholly leave his fellows behind. But this indirect and insensible influence is not the limit of our hopes ; we trust, even in this our day of small beginnings, to render more direct service to the community, and to take a more active part in meeting the needs of our generation. It is no new observation, that to the life and thought of this Colony the poet's words are peculiarly applicable, "The world is too much with us, late and soon getting and spending we lay waste our powers." We claim no right to make this a reproach to our fellow citizens, nor to look upon them as from a pedestal of superiority. The rush of the tide of commerce, rising almost too fast for our financial argosies to ride its crest, the imperious stress of business, the merciless strain of competition, the bewildering swiftness with which vistas of opportunity open on every hand, the eager energy of a young community pressing in the first flush of its vigour ever on to new conquests, the thrilling consciousness that we are here laying the foundations of an empire, and doing a mighty work for ages unborn—all this makes it seem less strange or sad, that men should fancy that these interests claim all their thoughts and powers ; that when art and literature are beckoning, they should think that they do well to reply, like the sternly earnest builder of old time, "I am doing a great work, so that I cannot come down. Why should the work cease whilst I leave it and come down to you ?" It is not obvious to all, but only by experience do men learn that the pursuit of culture is no hindrance, but a secret help in the race for worldly success, that wealth of intellect makes material wealth more valuable when won, widening the range of its application, and creating taste and refinement in place of vulgar profusion and senseless display. We cannot too steadfastly believe, nor too earnestly proclaim,

that the pursuit of gain, the struggle for existence, must not be all-absorbing, lest, when the goal is attained, we find that the hard-won rest is a joyless old age, an aimless *ennui* of weary years. It is a physiological fact, that the bodily powers will be the sooner worn out by toil if the intellect meanwhile is rusting out, if its faculties are not stimulated and exalted by what is at the same time a rest and a refreshment, which "will keep a bower quiet for us, and a sleep full of sweet dreams and health and quiet breathing." We hope, therefore, to attract into our society some world-weary toilers, who, as they accompany us on our pilgrimages into regions of thought and imagination, may find a charm and peace as of green pastures and still waters.

Our primary object being to arouse and foster an intelligent and appreciative interest in the best literature of the present and the past, we have bound ourselves beforehand to no stereotyped method of procedure. A series of papers, each followed by such impromptu discussion as their subject-matter and treatment may provoke, is a very common feature of such meetings as ours; but if it becomes the rule, it has this disadvantage, that, as few will undertake the trouble of preparing such papers, in process of time the work falls into the hands of a small section of the society, the rest becoming mere listeners, who, for want of previous acquaintance with the subject-matter of a given essay, are generally unprepared even to take part in a discussion of it. Hence we must endeavour to contrive that sometimes papers shall grow out of previous common readings and discussions. It may be arranged, for instance, that on a given evening shall be introduced to the society the latest work of some great author. It is not too much to expect that the reading and conversation of that meeting will secure for the next a number of short papers on his style, on the growth of his genius, his place in literature, his influence, his "school," and so forth. Again, we might have an occasional meeting at which each member would be pledged to appear, armed with a short criticism, or notice, though it be but half-a-dozen lines, of a work recently read by him. We shall thus furnish each other with suggestions and guidance for reading, and be also cultivating a discriminating, critical spirit in our reading. Bacon's aphorism will ever be true, that "writing maketh an exact man," and if we from time to time practise formulating our impressions, and recording our judgments of our reading, we shall be cultivating that

clearness and precision of thought, that faculty of sifting the bran from the flour, without which a reader may degenerate into a mere skimmer of books, and may wholly forget our philosopher's counsel, "to weigh and consider." We shall not only endeavour to keep abreast of the world's literary work in older lands, but shall study with peculiar interest the beginnings of Australian literature; we shall endeavour to rescue from oblivion noteworthy work done in the past; and though we will not undertake the invidious office of sitting in judgment on the present, it is possible that, by kindly criticism and helpful counsel, we may be of some service to those beginners who would fain be of the brotherhood of the pen. There are more of these aspirants than is commonly supposed; they have written to individuals amongst us now and then. There is something pathetic in their hard surroundings, in the ignorance which comes of dearth of opportunities, in the depression which lack of appreciation engenders. Something pathetic, too, in the groundless complacency which is born of uncritical praise, or of that good-natured commendation, which is but cruel kindness. Remembering how fallible mortal judgments are, and how little promise early attempts have sometimes given of the great achievements which have built an everlasting name, one shrinks from the single-handed responsibility of, on the one hand, damping the nascent enthusiasm of the muse; or on the other, of encouraging a youth "to pen a stanza, when he should engross." Not as a tribunal but as a board of advice, the Royal Society may, as the years go by, render some little service to the literary fledglings of young Australia. It may happen that, as with the Melbourne Shakspeare Society, so with ourselves, some of our contributions will expand into lectures, and we may thus become the means of spreading over wider areas a knowledge of, and interest in, high-class literature. Doubtless, as we go on, other methods of work and other opportunities of usefulness will open out before us, but I have said enough to show that we have a goodly field to reap, a harvest the ingathering of which will enrich not ourselves alone.

We do not, as I have already said, propose to limit ourselves to the study of the literature of our own day, or of the English-speaking race. The centuries behind us like a fruitful land repose, and not in Britain only rise the shrines of the Muses. In proceeding, therefore, to a brief survey of the present aspect of English literature, I would not be

understood as pressing this upon your attention to the exclusion of all else, but as constrained by limitations of time and space to deal with but a little corner of a vast area, and as wishing to indicate, from the abundance of this, what measureless wealth lies beyond.

The first thing that strikes us in connection with what we may call the Victorian era of literature, is its marvellous activity, the multitude of workers, and the rapidity of production. We have often heard how England became, in the days of Elizabeth, a nest of singing birds; the same might be said, perhaps with even more truth, of our own Queen's reign. The revival which began with Cowper, and which received a Titanic impulse from Scott and Byron, from Wordsworth, Shelley, and Keats, is unexhausted yet. The oldest poets' songs still breathe and burn with the fire of youth, and a throng of others are yet in full voice. There is, however, one peculiar and ominous feature. Speaking generally, no work of any of these, produced during the last ten or twelve years, has been an advance on their previous work, and in some instances there has been a decided falling off. This is not only the case with those to whom fulness of years might be expected to bring some decay of strength, but with those who should now be in the full maturity of their powers. In these latter, we observe a tendency to work more and more artificial, where diction and expression and technical effect are more than ideas; a tendency to imitative work, reproductions of old styles, to the neglect of originality. The execution is certainly wonderfully perfect, not a slip or a false note anywhere; but the lines make you think of engine-turned jewellery. As you read one page, you know what to expect on the next. There are no surprises, and when you pause from reading two or three score pages of this machine-made poetry, and try to recall one thought that has lifted you out of yourself, one hint that has lured you into dreamland, one touch that has "oped the sacred source of sympathetic tears," and find only a certain tired wonderment, as of one who has sat through an evening of conjuring tricks, then it dawns upon you that the wonder is nowise wonderful, nor the perfection of work perfect work. The poet has but to take care of the sound; there is so little sense that it can easily take care of itself. Years ago the sculptor fashioned divine marble and deathless bronze; delicate cameos and dainty gems engross him now, and seldom has gem or cameo borne such fairy

tracery ; but alas for us, and alas for him, if bronze and marble shall know him no more. Is it the beginning of the end ? Are the voices but singing on, when the spontaneity, the heart-throbs, have gone out of the song, and the wings of genius have flagged ? or is it but a pause of midsummer twilight, the falling of shadow that shall quickly be scattered by a new dawn ? Who shall say ? Ever and anon a brief outburst reveals that this singer and that can still put forth the old soaring power, the old fire, and we wonder whether it is weakness or wilfulness which makes these nobler notes so short and so far between. This interval which we seem to have reached suggests this as a favourable time for a review of the present aspect of English poetry as represented by our chief living singers.

The roll of the leading poets of to-day is one throng of splendid memories, it means to us thirty years of unsurpassed achievement, years resonant with melody, and rich with romance, thrilling with high-wrought passion, and rapt in noble visions and deep heart-searchings ; years in which poets' dreams were as the dreams of seers, and their speech like the crying of prophets. Noble themes and earnestness of utterance were the key-notes of those years, and it is just because these characteristics can never seem to be lost beyond recall, but to be resumable at the choice of the poet who has yet the power to sing, that we hope on against hope, that each next volume may herald the flowing of the tide once more.

From the time when Tennyson stormed the hearts of men with " *In Memoriam*," and wrought the world to " sympathy with hopes and fears it heeded not," his muse has always trod the mountain heights, as though conscious of a great mission, of powers consecrated to the help of brother men. We have stood with him beside the tomb, and seen the angel of consolation reach a hand through time to catch the far off interest of tears ; we have watched with him the sun of a noble purpose set in a stormy sea, and have learnt that defeat is not failure, nor any striving against evil vain. With him we have found love in huts where poor men lie ; we have from him learnt sympathy with the egotism of man's passion, with the fever of woman's unrest, with the despair of unfaith, and the night of hopeless anguish ; little children that lie on beds of pain are nearer to our hearts through him ; and England is stronger to-day for the battle songs that remind us that we are of kin to heroes.

He has been pre-eminently the poet of his own country, and of his own time. A reader who came upon Browning, Morris, or even Swinburne for the first time in the garb of a foreign tongue, might be long at a loss to refer them to their country or even their period, but Tennyson breathes England all through. He accepts as fit themes for poetry the speculations of latter-day philosophies, the onward march of science, the turmoil of political questions, the pressure of social problems; at the touch of his magic wand they reveal their mystery and their beauty, their solemn import and their deep pathos, the entangling of human hearts and lives with them; the faith that grapples with them, a bold and tireless wrestler; the hope that broods over them, an angel meditating a pæan song; the charity that suffereth long and beareth all things. We feel that he has given us his best through the golden years of the past, and we know that he will give us his best to the end. Now that the snows of fourscore years crown him, it will not be strange if we miss some of the old fire, the old glow of fancy, and strong free sweep of execution; yet, because he is Tennyson, we look forward with glad expectation to the new poem, which they tell us will come from that old man eloquent to us with Christmas over the seas.

Browning, too, "keeps the great pace neck by neck," with him that is but three years his senior, for he also has another *Argosy* well-nigh ready for the launching. It is characteristic of Browning, that we cannot tell whether a great treat or a great disappointment awaits us. His power we do not doubt; it is not nine years since his "Dramatic Idyls" recalled the finest work of "Men and Women," and "Dramatic Lyrics." And if since then we have groaned in spirit over "Jocoseria," "Ferishtah's Fancies," and "Parleyings with People of Importance," it has been not because of any signs of weakness, but rather of wilful strength in their author. Here is a poet whose genius is a rich gold mine. Many a great ingot of the pure metal has he brought forth, and yet—is it indolence, is it impatience, or is it scorn of his readers that leads him continually to cast at their feet, or rather hurl at their heads, rough masses of the native quartz, starred and veined with brightness it is true, but hard and refractory even to despair, bidding them do their own crushing and separating if they care for gold?

The Romans of old gave the name of "the mules of Marius" to those loyal legionaries who patiently submitted

to the grim captain's iron discipline, and so have these days beheld the mules of Browning, for whom no load is too merciless, no path too rugged for their patient plodding. They receive with humble gratitude his periodical bounties, and stolidly proceed to put them through the mill of interpretation and analysis, more than rewarded if they can proclaim that they have found a meaning. The Browning societies are a very doubtful blessing to their poet, for their tendency is to disguise the fact that to the world generally he is to a large extent unreadable, and, if he regards them at all, to confirm him in a course which may sorely thin his wreath of immortality. If it be objected that each poet has a right to his own style, and is under no obligation to stoop to a popular level, it may be answered, first, that there is no "stooping" implied in returning to the style of what even his votaries acknowledge as his noblest work, and which has a depth and clearness like Shakspeare's; secondly, that a great poet, dowered with a gift whereby he may raise and purify and inspire men's souls, whose song may be strength to the weak, comfort to the sorrowing, companionship to the lonely, and a spur to high endeavour—such an one owes to his fellows a free and generous recognition of the principle that "none of us liveth to himself." There is no poet whose disregard of it could be a greater loss to the world, for since Browning's special gift lies in the analysis and presentment of character, and since he has an inborn affinity for what is noble and true and strong, and since he holds with an unfaltering grasp those vital truths which deeply concern all men, and since in a day when the sensuous, the revolting, the unmoral assert their claim to the thrones of Valhalla, he is ever a witness for what is pure and lovely and of good report, it is of the highest moment that every stroke should tell, that the trumpet should give no uncertain sound, that the prophet should not speak in riddles nor babble in an unknown tongue.

To attempt to arrange in order of merit, like so many boys at a school, the great writers of any period, would be both futile and misleading; for, on examining their work, we find that their genius is at bottom dissimilar. It has an affinity for different subjects, and even should these be based on identical events or phenomena, it at once cancels the apparent identity by taking a different point of view, by selecting different features as most important, by a different moral attitude to the subject, and by singing the song to

different music. No one author ever exhausts the possibilities of noble treatment of a theme. Browning may go to the heart of it if he will, but there is that in it which it is not for him to win, and which may through another become to us a precious possession for ever. From the same mine whence he has dug diamonds, Tennyson will bring forth sapphires, Swinburne rubies, and Morris emeralds. There is no classifying; each sings his mighty song, and for each there is a several multitude of listeners whose spirits are most attuned to his, who take his best and let his worst pass, knowing that it is not truly and essentially of him. If we think that a subject appeals to Tennyson through its connection with human sympathy, the hopes and fears and strivings of men; to Browning through the scope it gives for mental analysis and the search for fundamental truth, we might imagine that it appears to Swinburne not as plastic material at all, but as a living thing, that it touches him with an electric shock, flashing on him a sudden vision of mystery and terrible beauty, sweeping around him a tempest of passion, in which motives and their working may be vaguely defined, and the sequences of thought be blended and confused. While other poets enter into and possess their subject, he seems rather to be caught up and possessed by it. Hence he comes nearer to the old conception of the poet, who, as Plato puts it, "creates his work not by wisdom, but by a certain might of nature and frenzy of inspiration, like soothsayers and prophets." It can be no prosaic age which has born and fostered this Pindar of passion-song, this singer of the heart's storm and the spirit's rapture, those rare moods of exaltation when we are like unto them that dream, when we tread on ether and think by lightning gleams. It was fitting that in command of his instrument, the rhythmical resources of language, in mere word-music, he should be wholly without a rival. He has revealed capacities for melody in our tongue that were unsuspected before. Over his strings our stubborn English floats softly as Italian, and trips daintily as lyric French, and swells with an oceanic surge and thunder that we had despaired ever to win from Greek. Ever since, five-and-twenty years ago, he shook our pulses with the thrilling sweetness of that hunting chorus in "*Atalanta in Calydon*"—

“ When the hounds of Spring are on Winter's traces,
And the mother of months in meadow or plain
Fills the shadows and windy places
With lisp of leaves and ripple of rain ”—

his harp has never been hushed, has never given forth a tuneless note. In swift succession followed the lawless beauty of "Poems and Ballads," immature in thought, and nowise meet *virginibus puerisque*, but in execution perfect; the mingled trumpet-blast and organ-roll of "Songs before Sunrise," and the other poems inspired by the same theme. Scarcely a year has passed since then without fruit of his exhaustless fancy, his wonderful versatility. Powerful dramas, some of them of most portentous length, rhapsodies of the sea, romance of Arthurian legend, echoes from the lutes of old France, revivals of old Border ballad song, marvellous achievements in forms of verse once exotic, but now made English; the apotheosis of the baby, the Armada's triumph pæan—he has proved his strong pinions in all, and has shown that he has soaring imagination, vigour of expression, and staying power enough for the grandest theme. A little cloyed with sweetness, a little surfeited with melody, a little weary of high-pitched passion, a little impatient of endless roundels and ballades and invocations to his latest idol, the babe, we would fain see him rise from sporting amid flowers and toying with antiques to crown with a worthy wreath the head of that dear England whom he has often hailed with song since eighteen years ago he cried—

"O thou, clothed round with raiment of white waves,
 Thy brave brows lightening through the grey wet air,
 Thou lulled with sea-sound of a thousand caves,
 And lit with sea-shine to thine inland lair,
 Whose freedom clothed the naked souls of slaves,
 And stripped the muffled souls of tyrants bare."

Surely there is inspiration enough in her heroic past, "the centuries of her glorious graves," in the Titan-tasks of her present; will her noble story not quicken, will the love of her not uplift, a great poet to do for her what Homer did for Hellas, what Virgil did for Rome?

When, twenty years ago, the tale of the "Earthly Paradise" followed on that strong sweet poem, the classic romance of "Jason," men became aware that the star of Chaucer was re-risen, that such a poet story-teller had come as England had not known for 500 years. William Morris took the old-time legends of Greece and Italy, of the Orient and the Northland, and married them to immortal verse—verse flowing clear and limpid as an unpolluted river, musical as a mountain stream. His strings were

never shaken by a wind of passion, nor his song perplexed with strange doubts and obstinate questionings—

“Glad, but not flushed with gladness,
Since joys go by ;
Sad, but not bent with sadness,
Since sorrows die.”

His muse, with far-away eyes, and heart unheeded of the life of to-day, seemed like a fairy godmother crooning by a prince's cradle the songs of Elfland, with effortless even flow of murmuring melody—

“Like of a hidden brook
In the leafy month of June
That to the sleeping woods at night
Singeth a quiet tune.”

But “that strain we heard was of a higher mood,” when, with a fresh keen wind from the Northland, with blast of war-horns and clash of sword and shield, “The Story of Sigurd” came as a revelation of strength and earnestness, of vigour and fire, of which he had given but half-tokens before. The swinging gallop of its sonorous lines, the unbroken maintenance of the “grand style” throughout, the heroic cast of thought, the wealth of incident, the energy of its magnificent battle-scenes, marked it as the most Homeric poem in the range of English literature. It was its author's high-water mark ; he has since then been more and more spreading his powers over many interests, and his latest work of this year, “The House of the Wolfings,” is rather like an ancient saga than a poem. In stately rhythmical prose, broken at intervals by speeches in the “Sigurd” metre, it tells the tale of the gallant stand made by our forefathers beyond the Rhine against the legions of the empire. Morris may yet give us much beautiful work, fascinating and perfect in its kind, but he has not taught us to credit him with the manifold possibilities of Tennyson, Browning, and Swinburne.

A very noteworthy characteristic of the poetry of the hour is profusion. The days are gone by when bards climbed Parnassus with slow and cautious step, giving good heed to their foothold, when Goldsmith thought ten years not too much for the production of the few poems and dramas which the world cannot forget, when Gray bought his eternity with the reading of one little hour. Now they go up the Aonian Mount by leaps and bounds, and reap the laurels with a bill-hook. There must be natural richness in the soil which (to change a familiar

metaphor) every time it is hurriedly tickled with a pen, laughs into such stintless harvests. Poppies and tares among the wheat, of course. No matter for that; posterity, which has plenty of time, may sort them out. And no one shivers with a premonition of doom, doubting what manner of sorting that will be when men gather the bundles for the burning. If Browning is profuse through crowded abundance of ideas, Swinburne through affluence of fancy and lordship over language, and Morris through wealth of material and facility of utterance, we might say that Robert Buchanan is so because he is in earnest about everything but writing good poetry; Edwin Arnold because he thinks that the "Light of Asia" has cast a glamour over men's eyes that will last his time, "and look a rosy warmth from marge to marge" of his exotic gardens; and Lewis Morris because he thinks—or shall we dare to say because he doesn't think?

Buchanan as a singing voice has been silent for some seven years, but between his twentieth and his fortieth year he poured forth verse enough to float—or swamp—three reputations. With no reserve or self-restraint, opening his heart to all the world, troubled by no misgivings as to his capacity to adorn any class of subject, he has roamed from classical studies to Scottish idyls, from "Phil Blood's Leap" to mystic transcendentalism. In "Idyls of Inverburn" and "North Coast" he struck his richest vein, full of perfect pastoral beauty and tender human sympathy, the pathos and the dignity of poverty and suffering. In "White Rose and Red," he essayed an Indian idyl, and in "Saint Abe" a Mormon romance of the Bret Harte type, with a success the spuriousness of which it takes an American eye to detect. But what Mephistopheles at his elbow prompted him to poetise Scotch metaphysics in "The Book of Orm," or to out-Shelley Shelley in "Napoleon Fallen"? There is no poet to whom the paradox is more applicable, "If he had written less, he would have written more." Akin to him in sincerity of conviction and in early promise was Jean Ingelow, whose voice rose like the song of a lark from daisied meadows, just as the nightingale notes of Mrs. Browning were for ever hushed. Her lyrical idyls were full of the music of sunny brooks and vocal English hedgerows. Among the cottage homes of England, her voice rang very sweet and true. There was surely variety and human interest enough in these for a life's work. She has not enhanced her fame by recent more ambitious efforts.

"The Light of Asia" was a great success, as it deserved to be. The richness and sublimity of Oriental poetry, without its vagueness and diffuseness, were there embodied in verse that was perfect of its kind, that was to Tennyson's as the floating grace of Aphrodité to the imperial tread of Pallas. It was, in the words of an almost forgotten poet, "a poem round and perfect as a star." There were even people to whom it came as a new gospel, and Buddhism became the cult of some Bostonian enthusiasts.

But the "Song of Songs" and "Pearls of the Faith" are far below it. They are fragmentary, without sustained interest, they are cabinets of "specimens," or albums of "beauties," they bristle with unpronounceable names, and recondite allusions; they do not read as if the thought of a far-off age and country had been passed through the crucible of a poetic mind aglow with inspiration. The fascination of their forerunner drew you on and on, till, when you reached the end, you wished the poem longer; you must be a proselyte indeed if these charm in like manner. It would seem that Sir Edwin must keep touch with Eastern fancy and imagery, or he is lost; for never did a poet who had once achieved a name, blunder into a more melancholy waste of commonplace, a flatter Batavian landscape of prosy rhyme, than he, in the volume with which last year he attempted to vindicate his claim to a place among singers of English song. If, as some have conjectured, it was a bid for the reversion of the laureateship, it must have been based on the theory that the office would be disposed of by Dutch auction. There is a fortunate resumption of the Oriental sumptuousness of fancy, now blended with the pathos of sorrowing love, in the just-published "In My Lady's Praise," an acrostic poem which takes up successively the precious stones whose initial letters spell the name of his dead wife.

It has been the misfortune of more than one of our prominent poets to be betrayed by success in one field into failure in another. Tennyson's mastery in development of character and human sympathy led him to tempt the gods in writing acting dramas. Edwin Arnold's success in piloting splendid argosies from the East, a rich storehouse of romance and mystery, entrapped him into producing original poetry out of his own head, which no one had suspected of being so forlornly bare. Lewis Morris achieved popularity, even to the 23rd edition—as he is at pains to inform us—by the art

of re-telling old-time stories with picturesque fancy and in easy-flowing verse, an echo of Tennyson's; but the stroke of Nemesis fell heavily upon his head—albeit somewhat callous—when the great vision of life, the mystery of its passion and its pain, stirred him to soar into the clouds in a grandiloquent “Ode of Life,” only to find, when at his highest, Tupper still a little above him. The public ear had become attuned to Tennysonian melodies and Tennysonian meditateness when the “Songs of Two Worlds” and the “Epic of Hades” appeared, and (in advertisement phrase) “supplied a felt want.” For here were poems, tender and graceful, to comprehend which entailed no intellectual strain, and which could be read without a mental effort—and the public likes to do its reading without thinking; poems not too deep and nowise dry, where wealth of sunny fancy disguised poverty of high imagination, and plenty of whip consoled Pegasus for being stinted of the divine fire. Had Morris maintained this level he would at least have been a charming poet, pleasant to read, in whose pages strictly moderate expectations would not be disappointed; but he fell below himself into mere book-making, and became often weak and washy, in “Songs of Britain,” “Gwen,” and above—or rather below—all, “The Ode of Life.”

The grove of the muses is full of singing birds, and ringing with sweet, pure notes on every side, but they are mostly imitative, echoes, or variations upon the strains of our mightier singers. The only distinctive class as yet unnoticed, is that of what we may call the “drawingroom poets”—the writers of society verse. These are of the lineage of Suckling, Lovelace, and Waller; they have caught up the lyre that fell from the hands of Præd. Their work, in its perfection, is marked by elegance of finish, by lightness of touch, and by rapier play of wit; an art concealing art most cunningly. Seriousness, of course, is alien from their whole atmosphere. They seem, as it were, born out of due time, and to belong of right to the days when patrician beaux fluttered and flaunted with diamond snuff-box and priceless ruffles through the glittering *salons* of Queen Anne. They have captured and haled at their chariot-wheels the forms of old French Court verse, marvels of daintiness and difficulty, the ballade, the villanelle, the roundel, the triolet, and all their fairy company. Of these graceful triflers, who are so numerous as to constitute a salient feature of what is, perhaps, our transition period, Austin Dobson, Edmund Gosse, and Andrew Lang, are

foremost. "Proverbs in Porcelain," "Ballades in Blue China," and "Rhymes à la Mode," are titles which aptly indicate the nature of their contents. It may be doubted, however, whether there is not something suicidal in collecting such trifles in book form. To come upon occasionally and unexpectedly, and amongst graver reading, they are charming; but marshalled side by side, like linnets ravished from their native copses, and crowded in a cage, they quickly pail upon you. It is a banquet wholly of syllabubs, and you soon feel very hungry, and there comes to you, like a wicked whisper, that epigram of the old satirist, which seems to have a cruel applicability to the author—

"As skilful divers to the bottom fall
Faster than those who cannot swim at all;
So in this way of writing without thinking,
Thou hast a strange alacrity in sinking."

Andrew Lang, in the work already quoted, says, "Now we dwell in an age of democracy, and poetry wins but a feigned respect, more out of courtesy and for old friendship's sake than for liking. Though so many write verse, as in Juvenal's time, I doubt if many read it. 'None but minstrels list of sonneting.'" Just so; the public is quickly sated with rhyming for rhyming's sake. But when what is both good poetry and good reading appears, it counts its readers by thousands; but while poets write to please themselves, to practise their hand in quaint measures, to catch far-off echoes from old lyres, to reproduce the outward shell of a past century's thought, while they give us the barren blossom of an airy fancy, the devices of a fine-strung ear, but do not dig deep into their own hearts, nor speak as those who are stirred with strong emotion, or lifted by mighty inspiration to utter things irrepressible, they need not wonder, they should not complain, if the world cares as little for their trifling as they for the world's needs.

I have thus briefly touched upon one department of the literature of our day, and that only in connection with living poets, of whom we may expect more, and for whom there is yet hope. I had intended to glance at fiction, biography, history, the drama, and so on; but these must needs wait a more convenient season, and, perchance, a more experienced critic. I do not flatter myself that my audience will accept all my conclusions without demur. In poetry, which is pre-eminently a matter of taste, each reader will find his own affinities, and will know what best appeals to him.

"'Tis with our judgments as our watches, none
Go just alike, yet each believes his own."